

War and Trauma: Seeking Refuge

Wendy recounts her harrowing tale that brought her to Toronto, but also the continual difficulties of living as a minority.

My mental illness started with living in Cambodia during the Rouge Regime and under the leadership of Pol Pot—I was 36 years old and this is my story.

I was a mother of nine children at the time. Five of them died during the war. Each time I recall their face that's filled with tears and pain, I feel heartbroken and a helpless mother.

“Mommy, I am starving. We want food. Please get us some food! We are dying!” They were pulling onto my shirt, with pure innocence in their eyes, not realizing the world around them, not having the slightest idea of the poison and destruction that was consuming everyone else. There simply wasn't enough food to feed them. I tried to beg others for scraps, searching the war torn streets for any form of nutrition, but nothing was available. We were ordered to move from one village to another, never having a permanent place to call home, a safe place for my children to grow up. By foot, we travelled hundreds of miles and slept under minimal covers in the rain—sometimes right out in the open. Slowly, several of my children fell into silence; their screams of hunger and tiredness turning into light moans, gasps for breaths, and then gone. Their voices are still in my memory to this day. Hope seemed like a fictitious word.

The trauma, distress, anger, sadness, depression, and hopelessness that I was undergoing never seem to come to an end. I didn't know what else I could do to keep my children by my side, to bring them up like I promised when I first held them in my arms. I had to keep trying, I had to survive, I had to protect my family. That day finally came.

In 1979 I managed to escape from communism with my children to a Thai Refugee. The journey took us to France in 1983 and eventually Toronto, Ontario in 1989. However, my mental health journey would only be exacerbated in Toronto—all I can say is that my relationship with my children became strained and fragile.

During that time, I really had no clue where the Cambodian population resides in Toronto. It wasn't as simple as finding the Chinese neighborhood at Spadina or Broadview. The city was a strange dark place for me. I was unable to think of anything else other than the strange sounds outside my window.

Eventually, my children left my side to live on their own and to avoid family conflicts. My family disappeared and I felt deserted, alone, and desperate. I had no ability to speak English and needed my children's financial assistance. I had no choice but to call the police; with my limited French, the police were able to connect me with Hong Fook. Immediately, I was connected with a Cambodian mental health worker and psychiatric treatment from the Asian Clinic since 1990.

Right away, I received advice and strategies of how to overcome the series of nightmares that haunted me; I did take medication, and this would produce some results, but ultimately, I needed to have self-strength, which I was able to get from my belief in God and the support from Hong

Fook as a whole, including Case Management, Self-Help, and all the staff. I can say now, with confidence, Hong Fook has become a family for me; their friendly staffs and their willingness to help me when I am in a difficult situation has always been encouraging and loving.

My journey has been an exhausting one, but there has been progress. My Hong Fook mental health worker keeps track on me, ensuring I was in good health, providing a source of light and hope for me. She even secured safe and stable housing and financial support for me. Through supportive counselling, I learned about my depression and how to cope with it. I joined the Cambodian Self-Help group where I was able to meet a community of Cambodians that I could not find by myself. During my struggles, I felt I was losing everything, but suddenly, I was feeling a resurgence of energy, almost as if I was given a second chance to live again. The regular meetings provided me with a desire to go out, do physical exercise, engage in social activities, dancing and singing. I feel happier because I can talk to friends about my issues and be part of a group that understands what I went through—that connection is invaluable.

Wendy continues to receive Hong Fook services; she is determined not to let herself fall into the same illnesses that threatened to take away her life. She hopes her story will encourage others to fight against depression and trauma, and to look for a better future.